

THE DAY WARMS QUICKLY, THE HUMIDITY RISING with the temperature, adding phantom degrees that can make a simple walk to the mailbox uncomfortable—and real work a miserable enterprise. The lush foliage created by the bountiful spring rains adds fuel to the waves of humidity that push up from the Gulf of Mexico. My work clothes feel clammy against the skin, like a claustrophobic fur coat.

The barn is hot, the air close and stifling as I gather my tools.

I look for the joy, but it is elusive. Where is the joy in sweating under a hot sun? Even the few birds who are still singing sound weary and morose. There is no breeze; nothing stirs but the laborer going about his rounds.

Linda needs the lower garden tilled, so I back out the machine, top off its gas and oil. With one pull it starts; I shift into Foreword and aim it toward the rectangular plot.

The victim who was about to be sacrificed is called in the Chaldean Language, Isaac; but if this name be translated into the Grecian language, it signifies, 'laughter'; and this laughter is not understood to be that laughter of the body which is frequent in child sport, but is the result of settled happiness and rejoicing of the mind. This kind of laughter the wise man is appropriately said to offer as a sacrifice to God; showing thus, by a figure, that to rejoice does properly belong to God alone. For the human race is subject to sorrow and to exceeding fear, from evils which are either present or expected, so that men are either grieved at unexpected evils actually pressing upon them, or are kept in suspense, and disquietude, and fear with respect to those which are impending. But the nature of God is free from grief, and exempt from fear, and enjoys the immunity from every kind of suffering, and is the only nature which possesses complete happiness and blessedness. Now to the disposition which makes this confession in sincerity, God is merciful, and compassionate, and kind, driving envy to a distance from him; and to it he gives a gift in return, to the full extent of the power of the person benefited to receive it, and he all but gives such a person this oracular warning, saying, "I well know that the whole species of joy and rejoicing is the possession of no other being but me, who am the Father of the universe; nevertheless, though it belong to me, I have no objection to those who deserve it enjoying a share of it." For the Father has not permitted the race of mankind to be wholly devoured by griefs, and sorrows, and incurable anguish, but has mingled in their existence something of a better nature, thinking it fitting that the soul should sometimes enjoy rest and tranquility; and he has also designed that the souls of wise men should be pleased and delighted for the greater portion of their existence with the contemplation of the soul.

Philo (c.20 BC—c.AD 50), *On Abraham*, translated by C.D. Yonge

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young woman, perfectly coifed with not a drop of perspiration dampening her brow, with no more than a few fingers of one hand effortlessly guiding her shiny clean tiller through the soil of a perfectly level garden. But in the real world I must wrestle the beast uphill, sweat pouring down into my eyes, using all the fingers and hands of both arms. I must lean into the effort, pushing and straining as the rotating tines fight against the winter-compacted soil. The machine belches gasoline fumes back into my face as a gust of hot wind blows by. I pause, gasping for breath in the thick, humid air.

And there at my feet lies the joy.

I bend down and sift my hand through the freshly tilled soil: fine, ready to receive the seeds. Here is the joy. Long ago the Lord entrusted this land to us. He didn't *give* it to us, in the sense that the world knows that word. But the Lord brought us to it in answer to our prayers, saying, "Here is where I want you to live. I place this land—this home—into your hands to take care of for Me. Nurture it, as it nurtures you; be good stewards of the land, make it grow and prosper, and I will cause you to prosper in return."

So we work the land, and the joy springs forth—not from the produce, necessarily, but from the *doing*. The joy is not so much in the harvest, but in the serving. The joy is not so much in the fine soil that passes through my fingers, but in the knowledge that it is being tilled for the Lord. He is the Landlord. He is the one for whom the labor is wrought, and the joy is found in the simple act of laboring and sweating to bring glory to His name.

The First Joy

I suppose it is a “guy thing”: We both work the land, but I run the heavy machinery. Linda will drive the old tractor to haul brush and weeds to the burn pile, or to haul compost from the woods to her gardens, but I am the one who spends the hours mowing the several acres of lawn. If the job requires a smelly two-cycle engine spewing fumes, or a working knowledge of a hulking brute to wrestle around the property, I’m elected.

So after cleaning its blades, I put away the tiller and gas up the tractor for mowing. Now, I don’t wish to complain, but when we got our new tractor, it came with an instructional videotape showing all the hows and wherefores of the machine. And, of course, in the video the shiny new tractor was being used by a gorgeous hunk on a postage stamp-sized lawn outside your typical suburban dwelling. All very *Leave it to Beaver*. The lawn was beautifully smooth, with few obstacles to mow around. No rocks, no dandelions, no gravel for the blades to inhale and carve away at their sharp edges. And naturally, he obeyed the rules by wearing goggles the whole time. He never sweat, and he never got dirty.

In the real world I must jockey around countless trees and bushes—most of which lash out at me, lacerating my bare arms with their lower branches. I must repeatedly mow over bald spots that, when dry, blow billows of dust, and maneuver around tree roots, rocks, and planters. And there is not one square foot in our three-plus acres of lawn that could remotely be termed “flat.”

The sun bears down on me, and the only breeze is the one created by my movement through the still air. Black gnats pester my ears. And again I wonder, Where is the joy?

The first section I mow is the teardrop-shaped island of grass inside the driveway loop. The old apple tree is still holding up, its branches bearing fruit this year. The next section is the largest: spread across the front of the house, wrapping east, up around the flower garden, around the wedge of large conifers, down along the drive, all the way to the gravel road. Out in the open, the sun is intense, irritating, but the blue sky is dappled with pretty cotton-puff clouds, and under my broad-brimmed hat I grin.

There is the first joy.

I fight the monotony of the long passes that take me from the west fence, straight east, around the curve of the drive north to the road. I want to use the time profitably—think time, planning time—but the heavy, steady drone of the engine makes organized thought a chore. I wonder if I’ll be able to finish the mowing today—or will those clouds collect up into thunderheads and rain me out this afternoon? What a shame that would be.

The spring and early summer rains have made more work: the grass is growing thick and fast. But with the rains come berries. Both the wild and cultivated raspberries, and the wild elderberries that grow in the ditches along the roads, appreciate wet seasons. As I pass along the fence line, the new berries are just beginning to color. Soon the thorn-armored stalks will be covered with black and red berries, and this year there’ll be plenty for jelly.

And there is the joy again.

As I move into the orchard to cut the scruffier grass around the young fruit trees, the purple martins swoop and swirl around me, as if wartime dive bombers strafing my position. But I am not their target. They are dive bombing mosquitoes. And I wonder why God created mosquitoes. But then the thought betrays my egocentric view of the

natural world, of which man is only a part. If nothing else, mosquitoes are food for many birds, bats—and purple martins.

The orchard is an obstacle course. With all the small trees and bushes the tractor steering gets a real work out—as do my arms, and I work up more sweat. But then I notice that the small apple trees are loaded this year. There will not only be much applesauce made this year, but with all the different varieties blended together, it will be especially good.

And there is more joy.

I pass the woodpile, near the last section, and see the flash of a chipmunk zipping from his home amidst the logs to the armored safety of the rainspout. On one of the Lord’s better days He created chipmunks, those tiny clowns that dart here and there, their cheeks bulging with nuts and seed, crouched atop the split wood piercing the stillness with their sharp, amplified chirp. They are small, wonderful joys.

The job done, I steer the tractor back to the barn, dusty, sweaty, my posterior both aching and numb from four hours riding the vibrating metal beast. I disembark bowlegged, stepping stiffly, wishing only to get out of my dirty clothes and into the shower. As I lower the barn door and head back to the house, I realize I have just spent a hot, dusty, weary afternoon—filling myself with joy.

THE WEST PORCH IS A WELCOME SANCTUARY at the end of a hard day: a room of windows, most of which face the valley and hills to the west, a rocking chair, and the gentle duet of crickets and song birds finishing their day.

Days die slowly in the summer; there is still an afternoon’s worth of hours beyond what would be the hour of sunset in the winter. So we work longer, push longer, and by the end of it the shower is a baptism containing about as much grace as simple water can hold.

The residue from a day’s worth of sweat and grime sent swirling down the drain, I lean back into the old wooden rocker, embracing the sweet ache of soft muscles stretched beyond their capacity. My eyes feel gritty from the dust and sun, my stiff back no longer fits the contours of the chair, and my hands are sore from long hours spent gripping the handles of vibrating tools.

Overture

Our west porch is reserved seating for God’s magnificent sound and light show. Twenty-five years ago Linda and I had sat in other old wooden chairs to witness the *Sound and Light Show* of the Giza plateau—the dramatic splash of colored lights and recorded music and narration that tell the story of the pyramids built for the three ancient Egyptian kings. But that extravaganza was little more than flashlight and finger shadows compared to the brilliant performance played out each evening across the western sky.

Awaiting the performance, I listen to the overture.

Just as they were earlier this morning, the birds are in full chorus. The brown thrasher is trying his best to imitate every other bird; the wrens, between scolding Thornton for getting too close to their nest, lift their full-throated melody skyward; the cardinals chirp and warble; and across the road, in the next field, a meadowlark adds its cheerful, yet slightly melancholy song. Together it is a multifaceted symphony in celebration of the dying day. It is their final chorus before they each turn away, silently, removing to their nesting places

scattered about the property, to rest before it all begins again on the morrow.

And I wonder—Why am I so cheered by the sounds of the birds? Perhaps it is because they seem to embody the full expression of my joy. There may indeed be boring biological rationale behind their songs, but to the naked eye they seem to be diminutive beings that find it hard to contain their joy. Perhaps it is because they seem to be unshackled by the same weights of convention, tradition, propriety and manners that so encumber us. To the inhibited human they seem to say, “*Oh, just let it out!*”

As the orange ball slowly descends into the hills, the curtain rises on tonight’s performance. Stray messengers, precursors of glory glide past, wispy exhalations of vapor back lit by the star. They tease with faint shadows of what is to come.

Outside my window, just a few feet away, a mother turtle backs into the shallow hole she has just dug and begins depositing her eggs. She leverages her position with her back feet, shifting side to side to distribute the eggs evenly in the hole. Without a sound she places her hope in the soil of our front flowerbed.

Expectant hope. As we stir the dying embers of one day, it is to place our hope in the new day that will rise from its ashes. It is another chance, another opportunity to embrace God’s grace in the light of a new tomorrow. The turtle buries her eggs in warm soil, the bird warms hers in a nest of twigs and daub, and the human gazes upon the fading light of a hard won day. All exercises in hope—hope in the future. But while the winged beast may more freely exult in God’s gift of life, it is the human who has been made in His image. His Spirit courses through our veins, and if we fail to give voice to our joy as extravagantly as we might, there remains only the deep, vibrating groan of our ancestry.

At the end of a day, when the world is being painted the rich amber of fading sunlight, there is a primal hum that moves across the land, drawing us in, drawing us upward, drawing us toward the throne.

A Psalm or Song for the sabbath day. It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High: To shew forth thy lovingkindness in the morning, and thy faithfulness every night, Upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the psaltery; upon the harp with a solemn sound. For thou, Lord, hast made me glad through thy work: I will triumph in the works of thy hands. O Lord, how great are thy works! and thy thoughts are very deep. Psalm 92:1-5 KJV

Performance

The shadows are returning to the hollows, deepening into dusk even as the final sharp rays of the sun pierce through the treetops. Evening haze moves into the valley below, and the distant lowing of cattle announces their longing.

Mottled ranks of clouds gather and arrange themselves in a symphonic spread between porch and descending globe. Higher still, arrow-like streaks are painted east to west, west to east, by passing jetliners. Congregations of busy travelers will be missing the show tonight, but their vaporous trails will become a part of the performance.

For a moment the sun is directly behind the clouds, outlining their shapes in brilliant silver and gold, transforming, for a fleeting moment, water vapor into priceless currency. But then it sinks lower, and the clouds lose their value.

Now the curtains part, and the show begins. As the sun descends below the clouds, it paints each rank in rich pinks and purples, until all are bathed in its glorious light. And suddenly the sky is afire with a symphonic conflagration, the colors of day-end roof the land in thunderous applause. One cannot add to the praise being uttered by creation; one can only stand in speechless awe at the work of His hand.

And there is the joy. At this moment words are meaningless chaff as my spirit soars skyward to ascend the brilliant causeway lit by God’s light. There is His hand—it is painted across the sky! He has shown Himself, graciously inserted His presence into the fading embers of my weary day.

There is the joy!—the unspeakable joy that He is present, that He is near. As I ascend, He comes down to meet with me, and our spirits unite midway, lost somewhere amidst the glorious hem of His robe that drapes across the sky. I stand humbled before Him: My God, how wonderful You are! dsj

*When morning gilds the skies,
My heart awaking cries:
May Jesus Christ be praised;
Alike at work or prayer
To Jesus I repair:
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

*Does sadness fill my mind,
A solace here I find:
May Jesus Christ be praised;
Or fades my earthly bliss,
My comfort still is this:
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

*In heaven’s eternal bliss
The loveliest strain is this,
May Jesus Christ be praised;
The powers of darkness fear,
When this sweet chant they hear:
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

*Sing, suns and stars of space,
Sing, ye that see His face,
May Jesus Christ be praised;
God’s whole creation o’er,
For aye and evermore
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

*Be this, while life is mine,
My canticle divine,
May Jesus Christ be praised;
Be this th’ eternal song,
Through all the ages long:
May Jesus Christ be praised.*
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